EXPRESSIVE WRITING

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Most of us have gone through times of great stress and emotional upheaval. This exercise gives you a simple, effective way to deal with these challenges and the difficult feelings they bring up. Research suggests that completing this exercise can increase happiness, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, strengthen the immune system, and improve work and school performance. These benefits have been shown to persist for months.

TIME REQUIRED

20 minutes per day for four consecutive days

HOW TO DO IT

Over the next four days, write down your deepest emotions and thoughts about an emotional challenge that has been affecting your life. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write continuously for 20 minutes.

Tips for writing:

- Find a time and place where you won’t be disturbed.
- Write continuously for at least 20 minutes.
- Don’t worry about spelling or grammar.
- Write only for yourself.
- Write about something extremely personal and important to you.
- Deal only with events or situations you can handle now—that is, don’t write about a trauma too soon after it has happened if it feels too overwhelming.
- Optional final step: After the four days of writing, try writing from the perspectives of other people involved in the event or situation.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS


Compared with a control group who wrote about superficial topics, participants who wrote about traumatic experiences for four consecutive days reported greater happiness three months later, visited the doctor less than usual during the six weeks after, and seemed to have a healthier immune system.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

While there is no demographic information in the study above, additional studies explore how this exercise benefits different groups and cultures:
• American psychiatric outpatients and people with mood disorders decreased in anxiety and depression after several sessions of Expressive Writing.
• Women undergraduate students in the U.K. who completed three Expressive Writing sessions reduced in eating disorder symptoms.
• Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) people (mostly white or Asian American) who did Expressive Writing about a time they received hate speech became more resistant to stress.
• Gay and bisexual men who did Expressive Writing about their sexuality daily for three days improved in emotional well-being, became more open with their sexual orientation, depended less on illicit drugs, and reported more safe sex behaviors.
• Bilingual British undergraduates whose first language was Korean or Spanish improved in social well-being after four days of Expressive Writing, especially if they alternated between writing in English and their native language.
• Latino American and Chinese undergraduates engaged in up to three consecutive daily sessions of writing about a traumatic experience and showed reductions in trauma symptoms.
• American undergraduates, American war veterans, and British people who experienced psychosis (all with post-traumatic stress disorder) spent up to four consecutive days doing Expressive Writing about their trauma and showed mental health improvements.
• Chinese undergraduates who completed eight weekly Expressive Writing sessions reported improvements in psychological, social, and physical health.
• Japanese undergraduates who did three days of Expressive Writing improved in working memory capacity (a sign of mental health).
• British, Swiss, Italian, and Iranian mothers who recently gave birth engaged in up to 10 writing sessions in the hospital and reported reductions in maternal post-traumatic stress and depression.
• Female survivors of intimate partner violence, women with histories of childhood sexual abuse, and women with substance abuse disorders decreased in mental health symptoms after completing several sessions of Expressive Writing.
• People with various disabilities and diseases, including people who have experienced seizures, heart attacks, chronic pain, respiratory disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, lupus, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, kidney transplants, and various cancers (including breast cancer in white Americans, Chinese Americans, Chinese nationals, and Romanians) improved in mental or physical health after Expressive Writing.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

When we experience a stressful event or major life transition, it’s easy to ruminate over that experience; thinking about it can keep us up at night, distract us from work, and make us feel less connected to others. Expressive writing allows us to step back for a moment and evaluate our lives. Through writing, we can become active creators of our own life stories—rather than passive bystanders—and as a result feel more empowered to cope with challenges. Transforming a messy, complicated experience into a coherent story can make the experience feel more manageable.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.